

Army of Snoopers Upsets British Privacy Tradition

By LEO HEIMAN

LONDON — Britain for centuries has been the symbol of a citizen's right to privacy from snooping and supervision. But no more.

Not only are there now more wiretapping and mail censorship but official interference makes it impossible for many Britons to lead what they consider normal lives. This emerges from a recent report compiled by the Public Committee for Protection of Privacy (PCPP).

Britain's austerity regime, coupled with the Socialist welfare state economy, has produced the strangest set of circumstances in England's history, the report points out.

For instance, customs inspectors are authorized to enter any post office branch in Britain and ask mail clerks to open letters of firms and citizens, to make sure they do not smuggle money out of the country. Many Britons are doing just that, customs spokesmen

claim, to beat the official 50-pound (\$120) allowance for overseas holidays.

Prospective travelers who feel that 50 pounds are not enough for a good time in Rome or Madrid, place folding money in plain envelopes and mail them either to their friends abroad, or to the hotels where they have booked rooms.

Customs authorities estimate millions of pounds sterling have been smuggled out of Britain in recent months in this way, nullifying the government's financial restrictions and economic policy. Hence, their assault on private letters which are steamed open and checked for hidden sterling bills.

PCPP estimates Britain's army of snoopers totals upward of 60,000 men and women, of whom 14,000 are officially employed by the government.

The report says phone tapping by police is now highly organized. In London alone Scotland Yard has 25 lines which can be used for inter-

cepting calls within a radius of 100 miles. The General Post Office has 40 wiretap officers on full-time duty and another 30 snoopers attached by other agencies of the government (Customs, Treasury, etc.) in London alone.

Not to be outdone, Britain's intelligence and security, collectively known as "Whitehall," operate 400-plus wiretaps throughout the country.

The PCPP report notes that phone tapping was at first used for security purposes only. Police applied for a warrant to the Home secretary and each case was carefully considered before even a suspected spy's privacy was invaded.

Now wiretapping has been extended to anyone against whom the police, customs, tax collectors and other authorities cannot find evidence by ordinary methods, the report stresses. No warrants are sought and in nine out of ten cases, wiretaps are simply registered as "Regular Service Check" or "Public

Box Control," allegedly to make sure public phones are not used for obscene calls, soliciting for immoral purposes and the like.

If there was anything more sacrosanct in Britain than the crown, it was first-class mail. Indeed, the post office was given permission to open letters without warrants only in the 1950s, following the notorious Burgess-MacLean spy scandal, when hundreds of government officials were suspected as undercover Communist sympathizers.

Since then, letter opening devices have been developed at Mount Pleasant, the London headquarters of the General Post Office, where 3,000 letters a day are steamed open, examined and resealed in a way which makes discovery of mail censorship impossible.

Suspect letters are scanned by an X-ray machine to check their contents. If the letter contains money, photographs, drawings or blueprints, the

envelope is inserted in a steamer which opens it with a thin steam needle. It can be resealed by a machine using a plastic needle.

If only hand or typewritten pages are inside, a tin made under the flap of the revolving needle-like pointer is inserted. This winds up the letter and extracts it through a hole. When the letter is read, it is pushed back and the needle unrolls it.

Municipal officials invading the privacy of citizens, the PCPP surveyors say, are a health danger. City council surveyors and public health officials can enter any house or apartment without a warrant if they feel it is a health danger.

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